

Tusculum Hills Baptist Church  
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THE PARABLE OF THE TENANTS

Matthew 21:33-46

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There are two points to my message today:

- The vineyard is the proving ground.
- The tenants disregard the owner of the vineyard.

**INTRODUCTION:** In this series of sermons on the parables, we learned that Jesus used parables to teach his followers. He also used them to confront the opposition. In Matthew 21 and 22, Jesus told three parables in a row to the religious leaders who didn't like him or what he was doing. Last week, I shared with you the parable of the two sons. Both were told to go work in the vineyard – one said no and later went to work...the second said yes but never did anything. The purpose behind the parable was to confront the religious leaders about their disobedience to God.

I'll go ahead and give the spoiler at the beginning of my message so you'll be tracking with me as I progress.

In today's parable, the landowner represents God. The tenants represent the Jews, the servants sent to collect the fruit represent the prophets, and the son of the landowner represents Jesus.

**SCRIPTURE:** Matthew 21:33

*“Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower.*

This describes a permanent vineyard. One that was expected to bear fruit. A lot of effort went into building this vineyard... to the point that it had a guard.

## **SCRIPTURE:** Matthew 21:33-44

*Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place.<sup>34</sup> When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.*

The rental agreement allowed for the owner to have fruit of his own.

*<sup>35</sup> “The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third.<sup>36</sup> Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way.<sup>37</sup> Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said.<sup>38</sup> “But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’<sup>39</sup> So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.*

What we have here is flawed thinking. They thought their problems would be solved if they killed the owner’s son. Jesus asks:

*<sup>40</sup> “Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”<sup>41</sup> “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,” they replied, “and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.”<sup>42</sup> Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: “‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes’?”<sup>43</sup> “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.<sup>44</sup> Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.”*

In summary, the parable is about the Jews rejection of Jesus and how God used the Gentiles to be the ones to share his message of salvation with the world.

## **THE VINEYARD IS THE PROVING GROUND**

**EXPLANATION:** It just so happens Jesus borrowed from Isaiah chapter five (written hundreds of years earlier) which was a song about God’s disgust with his people. In that song, a landowner had a vineyard on fertile soil. It had a watchtower and winepress. The religious leaders listening to Jesus tell his parable would have known Isaiah chapter five, because they would have studied it closely and would

have taught it to their own followers. Jesus got their attention by starting his parable with a story they already knew.

A proving ground is a place where a new product or idea is tested to determine whether it will work. In the proving ground of the vineyard, everything was provided to produce a good crop. In the song from Isaiah, God tended to the vineyard and did all he could to produce a good crop but it yielded bad fruit. There was no harvest. In Jesus' parable, there was a harvest but the workers were bad.

In the song from Isaiah, God said that the vines are his people. He had put them in fertile soil but they had yielded bad fruit.

In Jesus' very clever way of meeting people right where they were, he reworked an Old Testament story. No doubt they were hooked when he started talking. No doubt they thought, "Yes, we know this story. We know where he's going with this," because in Isaiah five, the people are condemned for yielding bad fruit... but they were still the vine. And they knew what happened during Isaiah's time up to the time they were with Jesus. The nation of Israel had its cycle of obedience and disobedience, but they were still the vine.

In Jesus' parable, however, the vineyard is given away. The Jews would no longer be the vine. Jesus cleverly led them to see their own fate. They had rejected God's own Son. Jesus foreshadows his own death in the parable. And because of this God would rent the vineyard to other tenants, the Gentiles. And that's exactly what happened in the days following this parable. The Gospel of Jesus Christ spread like wildfire over the Gentile world.

**APPLICATION:** How about today? Many have believed for many years that the US was the great bastion of hope for the sharing the Gospel. If the US is proving ground for the spread of Christianity, let's consider the resources we have: freedom of speech, wealth (even the poorest are wealthy when compared to much of the world), variety of education – really we have everything. What more could God give us? I am afraid that in many ways we are producing bad fruit just like those in Isaiah's parable as well as bad workers like those in the parable in Matthew.

So, what do we see happening? Today the Gospel is spreading faster in South

Korea, China, and Africa than it is in the US. Foreign countries are sending missionaries to us.

God's Spirit moves where people are most open. The Gospel cannot be squelched. Once America spread the Gospel around the world, but not so much anymore. But God's message of salvation through Jesus Christ will not be squelched by any human system. It will not be squelched by indifference. He'll raise up a whole new people group somewhere in the world to be his evangelists.

What we see in the countries I mentioned is God renting his vineyard to tenants as he sees fit and the vine represents all people who believe in God's only son, Jesus.

## **THE TENANTS DISREGARDED THE OWNER OF THE VINEYARD**

**EXPLANATION:** The narrative of a Messiah that would come some day was the narrative of the Jewish people. Generations longed for him to come. The prophets and priests of the Old Testament told of his coming someday. When the Jews became subjects of the Roman empire, they believed the Messiah would most certainly be someone who would save them from political oppression and set up a new kingdom.

A friend of mine wrote a book entitled, "The Changing Nature of Our Salvation" and in the book he outlined how each successive generation tends to change their ideas of salvation and heaven. He said that each generation thinks of salvation in terms of being set free from the current oppression, whatever it is, and that heaven is the complete opposite of that oppression. The Jews of Jesus' day certainly believed that. Their idea of a king was someone that would raise up an army to drive the Romans and any other invaders from their land.

Before being known as Jews, they were known as the Hebrew people, and I believe the earliest generations of the Hebrews more accurately believed the Messiah would save people from their sins.

**SCRIPTURE:** Matthew 21:45-46

*When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was*

*talking about them.* <sup>46</sup> *They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.*

**EXPLANATION:** The English word “know” comes from the Greek word *ginōskō* – “properly, to know, especially through *personal experience (first-hand acquaintance),*” and in this case it meant more than just know. It meant “They understood.” They understood, from experience, that Jesus was talking about them. And what was their reaction? To have him arrested. I firmly believe they disliked him because Jesus brought discomfort into their comfortable world. They all performed religious functions as a means of income and livelihood. They had a religious economy that worked for them. Even though they were politically oppressed, the Romans allowed them to practice their religion.

Their rejection of Jesus was rooted in fear: *What will happen to me if what I do for a living is no longer needed?* In the days ahead, the religious leaders convinced themselves that Jesus had to go. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the people more. They would have to figure out how to overcome the people. The Romans put him to death but the Jewish religious leaders were the ones who set the stage.

- They would plot and plan how to get rid of Jesus.
- They would recruit Judas to their cause.
- They would have to overcome their fear of the people.
- They would have to get the Roman government on their side.
- They would accuse Jesus of blasphemy in order to discredit him.
- They would do more than have him arrested. They would have him killed.

The main reason most of the religious people rejected Jesus is because he didn't fit the image they had in mind for a Messiah. Over time, they had concocted ideas of what the Messiah would be like -- what he would do -- and he just didn't fit.

**ILLUSTRATION:** In the early days of Christianity, any depiction of Jesus was controversial. People hesitated creating an image of him, lest people worship the image. Around 300 AD or so, there were paintings of Jesus on the cross and today, we have many famous paintings of Jesus.

The most famous painting of Jesus didn't come until 1940. It is called *Head of Christ* - it is the most famous painting of Jesus and was created by Warner Sallman.

Sallman was an artist in Chicago and decided to attend a Bible school. The dean of the school said, “Sometime I hope you give us your conception of Christ. And I hope it’s a manly one. Most of our pictures today are too effeminate.” That statement influenced what has become probably the most recognizable painting in the world, as it has been reprinted over half a billion times and influenced hundreds of millions of people. But it is only one man’s depiction of Christ.

Would your world be wrecked if Jesus returned today and didn’t look at all like your image of him?

**CONCLUSION:** In today’s parable we see that God provided everything for the vineyard to be successful, and we see that man is prone to take ill advantage of what God has provided.

For our altar call today, I appeal to you to not be like the religious leaders who refused to believe Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus, who, just days or weeks after he met with those people, was crucified on a cross, was buried and rose again.

In Acts 1, after Jesus ascended into heaven, the scripture says the disciples... *“were looking intently into the sky as He was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen Him go into heaven.”*

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I use the NIV translation of scripture because of its conversational nature. Feel free to go to Bible Gateway and copy and paste whichever translation you want to use. This transcript has been edited to an outline format that improves readability and therefore may not exactly follow the video edition.

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Sincerely, Paul Gunn  
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